

EMBASSY OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

PUBLIC AFFAIRS SECTION

TEL: 8802-55662000

FAX: 880-2-9881677, 9885688

E-MAIL: DhakaPA@state.gov

WEBSITE: <http://dhaka.usembassy.gov>



REMARKS BY U.S. AMBASSADOR MARCIA BERNICAT ON THE OCCASION OF U.S. INDEPENDENCE DAY U.S. EMBASSY, DHAKA June 1, 2016

Honorable Minister of Foreign Affairs

Distinguished guests, partners, members of the media, ladies and gentlemen:

Assalamu aleikum, nomoshkar, and good evening. And a warm welcome to you all.

Thank you for that kind introduction, Catherine.

As I hope you have learned from the décor tonight, the theme of our Independence Day celebration this year is “great rivers.” Both our countries are blessed to lay claim to some of the world’s legendary rivers. These rivers have sustained and inspired Americans and Bangladeshis for generations.

Rabindranath Tagore celebrated the “immortal music of Jamuna.” He memorialized the Padma’s “Bengal sky full of light, this south breeze, this flow of the river, this right royal laziness, this broad leisure stretching from horizon to horizon and from green earth to blue sky, all these were as food and drink to the hungry and thirsty.” These two rivers, along with the Meghna, complete the mighty triumvirate that defines the beauty and agricultural wealth of this country.

Meanwhile, Tagore’s near-contemporary Mark Twain paid tribute to the Mississippi. Twain praised its river towns as “comely, clean, well built, and pleasing to the eye, and cheering to the spirit. The Mississippi Valley is as reposeful as a dreamland, nothing worldly about it...nothing to hang a fret or a worry upon.”

The role our rivers play in our lives is just one aspect of the history and culture that the United States and Bangladesh share. We are here tonight to celebrate America’s Independence Day, the moment when an extraordinary gathering of renowned thinkers in Philadelphia laid out a vision for a nation grounded in respect for open discourse and differences of belief, faith, and

tradition. I would like to underscore how that description applies to both the United States and Bangladesh.

And I cannot resist adding that both our lands were once ruled by the United Kingdom... nice to see you High Commissioner Blake!... a heritage that has enriched our legal systems and cultural traditions... although, for some reason, Bangladesh has been the only one of the two of us to carry forward a particularly deep enthusiasm and talent for cricket!

The founders of our two countries – and note, I did not say “founding fathers,” for women played an equally vital role in the birth of our nations – understood that there is strength in diversity and the debate of different opinions.

From the moment Quakers in Pennsylvania to the religious dissenters seeking to reform the Church of England – whom we call Pilgrims – in Massachusetts, among other European settlers, set foot on what is now American soil, they sought not just trade and material riches, but the greatest treasure of all: freedom of conscience. The freedom to practice the faith of one’s choosing. The freedom to read and speak and write, even when new ideas are at odds with the conventional views of society or government. Such freedoms would later drive important discourse to abolish the practice of slavery, which also accounted for many of our first settlers, and eventually to changes in the treatment of the Native American population, who were already present when the settlers arrived.

Despite the enormous differences in the religious and political beliefs of these early settlers – beliefs that sometimes led to violence between them in Europe – they were able to see beyond those differences and identify what could unite them: the conviction that freedom, faith, and tolerance should, for the betterment of all, coexist.

There is an on-going, natural tension as the United States absorbs a continuous flow of newcomers. This is especially visible today, you may be noticing, as we are undergoing a demographic shift and as the economic models of the 20th century are evolving. This process is not gentle, and charting a course forward is proving to be painful at times.

Fortunately, to guide us we have the ideals of our founders, who foresaw the need to acknowledge and embrace such change. The willingness of Americans throughout our country’s history to confront the most difficult aspects of ourselves is what has given us our strength.

Such resilience born of founding principles is also legendary among the people of Bangladesh. So much of this country’s strength is derived from embracing its own diversity and tolerance of different cultures, religions and opinions. Bangladesh was founded on these principles, has embraced them since its founding and continues to do so as it, too, faces new challenges.

As we all confront the enormous threats that must be overcome in the 21st century, from those posed by climate change to violent extremism, I firmly believe that we are better positioned to address these challenges successfully together, rather than apart.

In 1789, George Washington wrote a letter to Muhammed Ibn Abdullah, Sultan of Morocco, whose country had been the first to recognize the newly independent United States. His words, in part, described a nation very similar to Bangladesh at the beginning of its existence as an independent nation. President Washington wrote, “Within our territories there are no mines, either of gold or silver, and this young nation just recovering from the waste and dissolution of a long war, have not, as yet, had time to acquire riches by agriculture and commerce. But our soil is bountiful, and our people industrious and we have reason to flatter ourselves that we shall gradually become useful to our friends.”

It is clear that the United States and Bangladesh have become – and continue to be – of tremendous use to one another, eager to find ways we can serve the common welfare of our citizens, and the world, together.

Thank you for coming tonight, and happy Independence Day.

=====